

71 Should We?



DNA fingerprinting can be used to identify children who are lost or kidnapped at a young age. Dr. Mary-Claire King helped develop and apply genetic techniques to identify over 50 lost children in Argentina. The methods she developed continue to help parents and grandparents find children in other countries torn by war and political conflict.



These people in Argentina are demanding to know what happened to the children who disappeared.



What are the ethical issues involved in using genetic information?

MATERIALS



For each student

- 1 Student Sheet 71.1, "Goals, Rights, and Duties"
- 1 Student Sheet 71.2, "Discussion Web: Should We?"

A TRUE STORY

From 1976 to 1983, a military dictatorship controlled the country of Argentina. During that time, at least 15,000 citizens who were opposed to the dictatorship “disappeared.” Most of the adults were killed. Witnesses reported that most of their children who were too young to talk or remember what happened were taken away to live with other families. At the end of the dictatorship, about 200 of these children were thought to still be alive.

The grandmothers of the lost babies formed a group and collected stories about the missing children. As the children entered kindergarten, school secretaries would secretly phone the grandmothers to report suspicious-looking birth certificates from newly registered students. Other evidence was also available: some of the mothers arrested during the dictatorship had managed to write the names of their children and themselves on prison walls before they died. In 1983, a new government replaced the dictatorship and a presidential commission was formed to study the problem. Thousands of people were interviewed. All these strands of evidence were collected and woven together. By 1984 the grandmothers thought they knew where many of their grandchildren were, but more evidence was needed before disrupting the lives of the children and their adoptive families. A genetics expert named Dr. Mary-Claire King was consulted.

Dr. King had perfected an advanced DNA fingerprinting technique to help make identification of biological relationships more reliable. She also helped set up a collection of blood samples and DNA fingerprints.

Using several types of evidence (including genetic evidence), some of the children were identified. Even with sophisticated genetic techniques, not all families were reunited: of the 200 missing children, only 50 were found by their grandmothers. Yet Dr. King’s work continues to help people in Argentina and in other areas of the world.

Cases like this raise an important ethical question. Scientists can find ways to identify lost children, but how should society use this information? The decision to return the children to their biological parents affects adoptive parents, biological parents, and children. Sometimes the answers to these questions are difficult.

Making a Decision

Consider the story of the lost children of Namelia. The court is convinced that Belinda and John have found both of their children. Mai and Paul have found their son. But the families who adopted the children were guilty of no wrong. They adopted the orphaned children, have taken good care of them, and want to keep them just as strongly as their biological parents want them back. A group of ethics experts has been asked to recommend what should be done.

You will use methods of ethical analysis to analyze the case of the lost children of Namelia. An analysis of goals, rights, and duties will help you explore the ethics of this case.

PROCEDURE

Think about the goals, rights, and duties of each group of people involved in the decision of whether to return the children to their biological parents. Record your ideas on Student Sheet 71.1, “Goals, Rights, and Duties.”

Analyzing Goals, Rights, and Duties

Goals: *What is the action intended to accomplish?*

In this case, what goals would be accomplished by returning the children to their biological parents or grandparents? Goals may differ depending on whom you ask.

For example, the goals of a member of a sports team participating in a game might include having fun, making friends, and/or winning. The goals of the coaches may be the same, or may include other goals, such as teaching good sportsmanship. The goal of the umpire may be to be certain the game is played fairly and according to the rules. The goal of a parent may be for the team member to get exercise.

Rights: *What are the rights of the people involved?*

For example, in the United States, the right to an education, the right to freedom, and the right to a trial if one is accused of a crime are just a few of the rights to which everyone is entitled by law.

Duties: *What are the duties of the people involved?*

For example, parents have a duty to provide food and a home for their young children. A judge in a courtroom has a duty to ensure that the rules of the court and the law are followed.

ANALYSIS



1. What are the pros and cons of reuniting the children with their biological parents or grandparents seven years later?



2. Imagine you are a judge trying to make a fair and final decision about whether to reunite the children from Samarra with their biological families from Namelia. Write your ruling and your explanation. Be sure to discuss any difficult ethical trade-offs you have had to make.

Hint: To write a complete answer, first state your opinion. Provide two or more pieces of evidence to support your opinion. Then consider all sides of the issue and identify the trade-offs of your decision.

3. **Reflection:** How does the goals, rights, and duties method help you think about ethical issues?



EXTENSION

- Research an issue in genetics that interests you. To get started with links to more information on recent research and issues in genetics, go to the *Issues and Life Science* page of the SEPUP website.